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Colonial borders in the Sahel affect Tuareg aspirations for autonomy and regional stability

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The colonial legacy of national borders in the Sahel remains a barrier to the Tuareg ethnic group's aspirations for emancipation, thereby increasing tensions in a region known for difficult climactic conditions and food insecurity. Niranjan Jose writes of the need to establish an area for Tuareg autonomy, and fostering dialogue with local communities to resolving the region's development challenges.

The Tuareg (or Touareg) are a nomadic pastoralist group of Berber origin from the Central Sahara and Sahel. The indigo-blue veiled Tuareg people have been **romanticised** in popular culture as *Hommes de nulle part* (men from nowhere) and *chevaliers du désert* (desert knights). They practice Islam but uphold idiosyncratic customs, such as only men wearing veils.

Without a nation, the Tuareg **travel across the Western Sahel**, mostly based in northern Mali and northern Niger, where they make up around 10% of the national population. Other Tuareg settlements are in southwestern Libya and southern Algeria. Diverging paths taken by various groups, whether by settling in different regions or retaining nomadic lifestyles, have led to **stark differences** in their religions, dialects and customs.

Ripple effects of the colonial past

The concept of a nation-state was unknown among the Tuareg before colonisation. Living as **nomads** amid the arid, barren and unforgiving lands of their regions, fixed borders were unthinkable. These days the Tuareg live in dangerously unpredictable climatic conditions, among the poorest regions in the world, often leading to chronic food insecurity, where borders continue to represent a barrier to Tuareg's aspirations for emancipation and improved livelihoods. While globalisation promised a free flow of goods and people, the Tuareg remain **paralysed in the Sahara**, repressed by their respective governments.

Tuareg nationalism as a political ideology is rooted in the legacies of colonisation, **sharpened by decades of the group's marginalisation** and since becoming a useful tool in the hands of regional powerbrokers. Removing the Tuareg minority group from the centres of power, geographically and culturally, the retreating French colonists left political power mostly in the hands of movements dominated by black, settled Africans, with whom the Tuaregs shared limited common history and cultural identity.

Restrictions on the **Tuareg people's movement**, a direct result of the imposed colonial national borders, have led to competition for **resources and conflict** with neighbouring ethnic groups, adding to a variety of economic, social and political grievances experienced by others in the region. Islamist terror groups from Algeria consequently made **common cause with the Tuaregs**: the GSPC, the precursor to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), began earning money collaborating on smuggling and money-laundering. Confusing the cause of Tuareg self-determination with that of Islamic militancy, young Tuareg more in desperation than religious fervour accepted employment with Islamists in the region.

Tuareg's identity crisis

The Tuareg people have consistently **taken part in uprisings** in search of independence. The first was a 1916 revolt in retaliation of the French government's refusal to fulfil their promise of granting the Tuareg an autonomous zone (called Azawad). The French **violently quelled the revolt** and subsequently confiscated important grazing lands while using Tuaregs as forced conscripts and labour, fragmenting Tuareg societies through the imposition of arbitrary boundaries.

In the 1960s, while the independence movements in Africa were ongoing, the Tuareg once again **vied for their autonomy** in what was known as the Afellaga rebellion. The government of Modibo Keita, who came to power after the French left Mali, strongly suppressed the Tuareg, neglecting them more than others in the distribution of state benefits. Moreover, post-colonial Mali's senior leadership was drawn from southern ethnic groups unsympathetic to the northern desert nomads' pastoral traditions.

The strong-arm tactics of the government had quelled the revolt by the end of 1964, followed by placing the northern areas inhabited by the Tuareg under an oppressive military regime. Droughts caused by the desertification of Sahel during 1968-74 and 1984-85 dramatically **affected the Tuaregs**, leading to decreased resources and commercial revenue. Many were forced to leave for towns, where they were marginalised economically and culturally. The legitimacy of the state was irreparably damaged and long-standing ethnic tensions were intensified by years of Mali's misgovernance.

Thousands of Tuaregs affected by drought were forced to **abandon their nomadic lifestyle**. Many young Tuareg men fled north to Libya in the 1970s and 80s, carrying with them the grievances of their people towards the Mali government and joining guerrilla groups. Because Colonel Gaddafi **promised the Tuareg huge amounts of money** to serve as mercenaries in the Islamic Legion, Libya was an attractive destination, creating an armed force whose purpose was to create a unified Islamic state in North Africa. Their knowledge of the region's terrain and the ability to live in restrictive conditions made them a formidable force in the region.

The rise of the MNLA

The Mali government pledged resettlement programmes in the 1980s if the Tuaregs returned from Libya and Algeria. The initiatives never materialised, and instead a hostile political situation developed in the country, **instilling a greater sense of identity** and common purpose among the group. In the 1990s, they started returning from Libya and Algeria, seeking greater autonomy and infrastructure initiatives that would minimise the disruption caused by drought, and an end to their isolation from local political power.

With the Tuareg **seeking greater regional autonomy** and infrastructure projects for the region, the conflict quickly erupted into a massive violent uprising. The Western-backed ousting of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 was a turning point. With his death, several Tuareg mercenaries returned home, bringing Libya's **modern weapons with them**. A hard transition for the Tuareg fighters who had seen Libya's comparative well-being, they were now shocked to see their home country ravaged by famine, hunger and disease, and sought to **reinstate stability and prosperity** to the community and restore their only source of livelihood, the dwindling pasture land.

In 2011, the 'National Movement for Liberation of Azawad' or **MNLA** was formed, a political-military platform to continue the Tuareg's fight for self-rule. Just one year after the formation of the MNLA, the Tuareg group took advantage of Mali's political instability and **toppled the Malian government forces** in March 2012. The MNLA declared the independent state of **Azawad**, in what had been northern Mali.

But the movement was eventually exploited and undermined by insurgents affiliated with al Qaeda who had been operating in the country for years, who through smuggling and extortion had **developed a large revenue base**. In the ancient city of Timbuktu, Al Qaeda-linked Mali Islamists implemented strict regulations on residents and continued to destroy ancient monuments. In 2013, they advanced through northern Mali, capturing major towns and eventually **forcing French intervention**.

Unrealised political autonomy

In 2013, an Algerian-brokered peace treaty brought the Azawad uprising to a halt, negotiated by the representatives of the Azawad Movement and Mali. According to the agreement, both parties would respect the 'unity and territorial integrity of Mali', and the Malian government promised to establish a more decentralised political structure with its regional council voted through universal suffrage. The treaty allowed for a higher proportion of the Azawad communities to enter Malian government bodies, yet these commitments to greater political autonomy for the Tuaregs in the north have not yet materialised. As a result, the Mali government continues to face major challenges managing the province and has so far struggled among the Tuareg to create trust.

Mali has become a symbol of poor governance, where freedom of expression is denied and the government is unable to protect its people using a poorly equipped and incompetent military, leading many to call the once prominent democracy the Afghanistan of the Sahel. Of foremost importance is the need to establish an environment suitable for maintaining peace in areas that enable the Tuaregs to oversee themselves, fostering a dialogue with local communities and maintaining a proactive approach to resolving the region's development challenges.

About the author



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